INTRODUCTION TO AMERICA’S MUSIC

The history of modern American popular music encompasses diverse traditions and extraordinary musical inventions. Americans made their popular music through a fundamental process of exchange across social lines, the same lines where American identity is formed and continually reformed, and where diverse cultural traditions meet, collide and mix. How Americans respond to this diversity of traditions, seeing it as a threat or a wealth of possibilities, informs our great promise as a nation.

American popular music comprises a diverse array of styles that reflect the country’s multi-ethnic population. Beginning in the 17th century, immigrants from England, Spain and France, and later Ireland and Germany, brought unique styles and instruments with them. Each subsequent group of immigrants would add to the mix of musical styles. African American slave communities, for example, brought influential musical traditions that drew on sophisticated rhythms and improvisation that they combined with European traditions and other indigenous music.

While American music grew from hundreds of indigenous or immigrant groups who developed their own local or regional styles, cross-cultural hybridization has long characterized American popular music. The most distinctly American musical genres resulted from close contact between different social groups. Scholars mark the Civil War as a turning point for new distinctly American musical forms. People from many regions came together in army units where they traded musical styles and practices. Civil war ballads became a truly national American folk music, with discernible features distinct from any one regional style.

The turn of the twentieth century marked a period of sweeping change in American society. In 1890, fewer than one in four Americans lived in cities. By 1920, more than half lived in urban areas. Massive migration from both Europe and the American heartland changed the nation’s demographic make-up and established the city as the center of an emerging national culture.

During the early 20th century, these social changes combined with new technologies to create a mass market for popular music. While sound recording was invented by Thomas Edison in the United States and Charles Cros in France in the late 19th century, not until the 1920s did the record industry and then radio become the primary means for disseminating music. By the beginning of the 20th century, the music publishing industry became centralized in New York City; in a downtown area called Tin Pan Alley, where an army of composers and marketers wrote and promoted hundreds of new songs. The Tin Pan Alley publishing firms—many of them started by Jewish immigrants who found other professions closed to them—produced and publicized popular songs like any other manufactured product. Performers such as Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker promoted songs in cross-country tours. By the 20s and 30s, Tin Pan Alley songs were popularized in Broadway musicals, which set the standard for popular songs throughout the century.

While Tin Pan Alley songwriters catered to a national taste for sentimental ballads, a new kind of music was evolving in the South. Jazz’s signature home was New Orleans, whose multi-ethnic mix of African Americans, Creoles, Native Americans, and people of European, Caribbean and Latin American descent was unique. The first jazz music combined elements of ragtime, marching band, and blues—an African American style that grew from the harsh conditions of the Jim Crow South. What made jazz different from these earlier styles was the use of improvisation.

America’s increasing industrialization during the first two decades of the 20th century created great demographic shifts as workers moved from rural areas seeking greater economic opportunity. African Americans took part in the Great Migration to the North to find work and to escape the prevailing racism of the South. Among the migrants were musicians who brought jazz to cities like Chicago and New York,
blending their Southern roots with a new urban sensibility. The 1920s became known as the "Jazz Age" when Americans, still reeling from the experiences of WWI, embraced the ‘new’ as they forged a 20th century identity. Among the greatest early jazz pioneers was Louis Armstrong, who brought his distinctive timbre, scat singing and relaxed, swinging phrasing to this distinctly American musical form.

The popularity of jazz peaked in the swing era, which lasted through the Depression and World War II. The African American bands of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie created a powerful rhythmic driving sound for dancing that swept up millions. White bands headed by such musicians as Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey adapted and brought the music to widespread popularity. Facing the greatest economic calamity in their history and then a World War, Americans embraced swing as a respite from worry and the music became a source of renewal and optimism.

While swing jazz grew to be America’s most popular music, other forms of popular music were also emerging. By the 1930s, the religious spirituals and blues music of African Americans had evolved into what is now known as gospel music. Based in storefront churches as well as national ministries, the gospel movement brought an unconstrained fervor and emotionalism to music that had not been heard before. Country music, initially made and embraced largely by rural working white folks, also developed in the first half of the 20th century. Appalachian string band dance tunes, traditional ballads and sentimental pop songs all influenced the remarkable sounds of so called “hillbilly music.” Country music was popularized and disseminated through radio and recordings beginning in the 1920s.

Gospel and country are distinct genres, but share some common history. Both began in the hard times of rural life, yet grew roots and branches in the cities. Bluegrass, a sub-genre of country, especially had an appeal to urban audiences. Both country and gospel developed separate white and African American strands, even though they originated in music that crossed the color line. In the face of the modernization of the early 20th century, both gospel and country music spoke to people’s nostalgic yearning for the past. Yet both confronted the realities of living in the modern era, with themes ranging from everyday working life to life on the road or romance gone wrong, to the search for spiritual roots in a modern world.

The second half of the 20th century witnessed an explosion of musical styles whose development coincided with immense social and political change. The years after World War II found the United States at the forefront of global economic and military power, and politically locked in a cold war. Domestically, the country underwent tectonic demographic shifts, especially suburbanization, while an emerging Civil Rights movement and later an anti-war protest movement began to rock the foundations of its traditional power structure. The 1950s saw the arrival of rock and roll and rhythm and blues, which drew on many older styles -- country, blues, gospel and pop. Fueled by adolescent listeners, the music came to prominence through independent record labels that promoted distinct regional styles in cities like Memphis, New York, and Detroit. Rock captured young listeners in the U. S. and spread around the world to grow to greater prominence than jazz.

The music of the 50s and 60s also engaged cold war and civil rights politics, and resonated with the aspirations and anxieties of American life. While the United States grappled with the claims of people of color for equal rights, rhythm and blues as ‘soul music’ brought African American culture without apology to a mainstream audience. The baby boom generation’s utopian hopes for an American society plagued by poverty and inequality found expression in the ideas and emotions at the core of popular music. Music was indispensable to the history of that time when Americans grappled with the claims of their fellows for full and equal citizenship.

The last decades of the 20th century witnessed the continuing influence and diversification of American popular music. In the 1980s, charismatic performers -- Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson, Madonna— reached worldwide mass audiences by challenging the boundaries of identity and social background. Rap,
hip hop, disco and punk were all musical genres born in the declining industrial cities, springing from the experiences of working class and racial minorities increasingly segregated in urban enclaves, and appealing to middle-class suburban youth responding to an era of economic and political instability. Always an influence in American music, Latin music exploded into the mainstream with the success of the mambo, cha cha and other dance crazes that swept the country in mid-century, and later with salsa and Tex Mex singer Selena in the 1990s and artists like Jon Secada and Ricky Martin. Technological advances and new packaging techniques, starting with MTV’s rock videos and continuing with the rapidly evolving use of digital technologies, have generated new questions about the availability and ownership of all music in the new technologies.